

# Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG): An Al-Qaeda Associate Case Study

P. Kathleen Hammerberg and Pamela G. Faber

With contributions from Alexander Powell

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Dr. Jonathan Schroden, Director  
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## Abstract

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states: “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.” The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.

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# Glossary

|              |                                                                              |
|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AFP          | Armed Forces of the Philippines                                              |
| ARMM         | Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao                                         |
| AQ           | Al-Qaeda                                                                     |
| AQAP         | Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula                                            |
| AQI          | Al-Qaeda in Iraq                                                             |
| AQIM         | Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb                                              |
| AQIS         | Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent                                          |
| AQS          | Al-Qaeda Syria                                                               |
| ASD (SO/LIC) | Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict |
| ASG          | Abu Sayyaf Group                                                             |
| CMO          | Civil-Military Operations                                                    |
| CPP          | Communist Party of the Philippines                                           |
| CT           | Counterterrorism                                                             |
| DOD          | Department of Defense                                                        |
| DOS          | Department of State                                                          |
| IO           | Information Operations                                                       |
| ISIS         | Islamic State in Iraq and Syria                                              |
| JI           | Jemaah Islamiyah                                                             |
| LOE          | Line of Effort                                                               |
| LRC          | Light Reaction Company                                                       |
| LRR          | Light Reaction Regiment                                                      |
| MILF         | Moro Islamic Liberation Front                                                |
| MNLF         | Moro National Liberation Front                                               |
| NCO          | Non-Commissioned Officer                                                     |
| NDAA         | National Defense Authorization Act                                           |
| NPA          | New People's Army                                                            |
| OEF-P        | Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines                                       |
| PNP          | Philippine National Police                                                   |

|     |                            |
|-----|----------------------------|
| PSF | Philippine Security Forces |
| SAF | Special Action Forces      |
| SOF | Special Operations Forces  |
| WOT | War on Terror              |

# Introduction

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.” The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.<sup>1</sup>

Section 1228 specified that the independent assessment should include these topics:

1. An assessment of Al-Qaeda core’s current relationship with affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.
2. An assessment of the current objectives, capabilities, and overall strategy of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how they have changed over time.
3. An assessment of the operational and organizational structure of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.
4. An analysis of the activities that have proven to be most effective and least effective at disrupting and dismantling Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.
5. Recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia McQuaid, Jonathan Schroden, Pamela G. Faber, P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Alexander Powell, Zack Gold, David Knoll, and William Rosenau, *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

In order to answer the first four questions posed by Section 1228, CNA conducted eight case studies on groups affiliated and associated with Al-Qaeda.<sup>2</sup> The case studies were then used to conduct a cross-case comparative analysis.

This document is a stand-alone version of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) case study used in the *Independent Assessment*. CNA is publishing each of the eight case studies separately for the convenience of analysts and others who may have a regional or functional focus that corresponds to a specific case study. For the context in which this case study was used and for CNA's full findings, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.<sup>3</sup>

The present case study is organized as follows: First, we introduce ASG by highlighting its leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. Second, we explain the evolution of the group by phases, from its origins to the present day. Third, we outline the security vulnerabilities in the areas of the Philippines where ASG operates. Fourth, we outline the U.S. approach to countering ASG. We conclude the case study with a discussion on whether the U.S. has, at any time, effectively defeated, dismantled, or disrupted the group.

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<sup>2</sup> These groups include: Al-Qaeda "core," Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shebab, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Al-Qaeda Syria (AQS), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

<sup>3</sup> McQuaid et al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.

## Classifying ASG as an Associate

Though ASG was included as a case study in the independent assessment, it was not classified as an Al-Qaeda affiliate, but rather an associated group. This is largely because despite the strong personal relationship between ASG founder Abdurajak Janjalani and Osama Bin Laden, there was no reported formal pledge of allegiance to Al-Qaeda. There is also no indication that there was an acceptance of any formal pledge of allegiance. This does not necessarily mean that the relationship between ASG and AQ was weaker than the relationship between AQ and its formal affiliates. ASG did receive funding and training from AQ-core and maintained a relationship that was in many ways more direct than other, formal, affiliates. However, ASG functioned more independently than official affiliates, and grew alongside rather than underneath AQ-core.

ASG may not have developed into a formal affiliate for several reasons. First, as ASG's development was largely concomitant with AQ-core's rise, the relationship between ASG and AQ-core may have been one of quasi-equals as opposed to the often subordinate relationship that arises from a formal 'affiliate' role. Second, it is possible that ASG and AQ-core were not sufficiently strong, competent and willing to develop an affiliate relationship at the same time in the 1990s and 2000s when many of the other affiliations were formalized.

ASG was included in CNA's independent assessment despite a lack of formal affiliation for three reasons. First, ASG is a significant AQ-related group that has had a large impact in a geographic region that is not otherwise represented in this assessment. Second, the relationship between ASG and AQ represents another type of interaction outside of the affiliate framework. Though this report has scoped out the majority of AQ's associates and adherents, ASG provides an opportunity to underscore the importance of these alternative relationship structures and demonstrate how they function. Third, counter-ASG efforts by the U.S. and Philippine governments are sufficiently unique to be featured regardless of ASG's alternative relationship to AQ in order to accurately represent the range of CT strategies carried out by the U.S. government and its partners.

## Overview

Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), established in 1990/91, is a Philippine-based fundamentalist Islamic group with ties to Al-Qaeda (AQ) and other South Asian extremist groups including Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). As of 2014 part of the group has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS). The group has been beset by divisions and fractures. Two primary sects of ASG have emerged; one the Sulu/Jolo faction is presently lead by Raduallan Sahiron, while the Basilan faction is headed by Isnilon Hapilon. Today the primary disagreement between the groups relates to whether they have pledged allegiance to ISIS. ASG's primary goal is to establish an independent Islamic state in western Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.

This section highlights ASG's historical trajectory by phase. Overall, the group's actions have been inconsistent over time, shifting in accordance with ASG's relative strength, resources and the vision of its leadership. There shifts have led to an inconsistent strategic trajectory over time. While at times the group has carried out ideologically-based operations focused on the establishment of an autonomous Muslim state in the Philippines governed according to Sharia law, it has also conducted attacks with the sole purpose of banditry and criminality. Over time, however, the group has remained fundamentally radically Islamic.

ASG is largely funded through kidnapping for ransom operations and extortion. It has also received external funding through other extremist groups, such as JI, and oversea remittances.<sup>4</sup> ASG operates primarily in the Philippine provinces of the Sulu Archipelago, namely Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi; and on the Zamboanga Peninsula. The group also operates in Malaysia.

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *Country Reports on Terrorism 2014*, 2014, accessed 6/8/2017, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239413.htm>.



# Evolution of ASG by Phase

## Phase zero: The emergence of ASG (1970s–onward)

The Philippines has faced socioeconomic and demographic tensions centering on secessionist movements in its southern islands for decades. These movements have been led by multiple Muslim minority insurgent movements asserting themselves against the Catholic majority.<sup>5</sup> One significant insurgency in the 1970s was led by Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a group which demanded an independent Muslim state. From 1973 to 1978, the MNLF waged a guerrilla war with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). This dispute resulted in negotiations between the Philippine government and the MNLF in 1989 that led to the establishment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). It also led to a splintering within the movement. One splinter group formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which demanded independence for Muslim populated regions. The MILF gained strength in the 1990s and collaborated with JI, an Al-Qaeda-associated terrorist group present across Southeast Asia, prompting a military offensive by then President Joseph Estrada. A second splinter group, al Harakat al Islamiyya (the Islamic Movement), later known as ASG, was formed in 1990 or 1991.

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<sup>5</sup> Linda Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy,” *PRISM* 6, no. 3 (2016), accessed 6/7/2017, [http://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism\\_6-3/Robinson.pdf?ver=2016-12-06-101054-373](http://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_6-3/Robinson.pdf?ver=2016-12-06-101054-373).

## Phase one: Ideologically driven fundamentalist group with a direct connection to Al-Qaeda Core (1989–1998)

ASG was founded by and named after Abdurajak Janjalani, a Filipino native from Basilan, who took the nom de guerre Abu Sayyaf, “Father of Swordsmen.”<sup>6</sup> Janjalani, who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the early 1980s, encountered Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan and participated in the foundational leadership circle of AQ core.<sup>7</sup> ASG was allegedly founded at the behest of Osama Bin Laden.<sup>8</sup> Janjalani had previously participated in the MNLF, which like ASG sought to create an independent Islamic state in the Moro.<sup>9</sup> ASG was formed partially to disrupt the on-going peace talks between the MNLF and the Philippine government.<sup>10</sup>

Ties to AQ during this foundational phase were strong and direct because of Janjalani’s personal relationship with Bin Laden and Bin Laden’s brother-in-law, Mohammed Jamal Khalifa. ASG received both funding and training from AQ core,<sup>11</sup> including financial support through Khalifa’s charity that operated in the southern Philippines. ASG also received bomb making training and funds from AQ bomb maker Ramzi Yousef when he came to the Philippines in 1994, using Manila as the base for the failed Bojinka plot.

ASG’s direct connection to AQ diminished after the failed Bojinka plot,<sup>12</sup> the 1995 arrest of Ramzi Yousef in Pakistan, the barring of Mohammed Jamal Khalifa from

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<sup>6</sup> Counter Extremism Project, “Abu Sayyaf Group,” accessed 6/8/2017, <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/abu-sayyaf-group>.

<sup>7</sup> CENTRA Technology, Inc. “Terrorist Group Profile: Abu Sayyaf Group,” Research Paper. 1 February 2007; Billye Hutchison, “Abu Sayyaf,” the Counterproliferation Papers, Future Warfare Series No. 49, USAF Counterproliferation Center, page 3; Zachary Abuza, “Balik-Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf,” September 2005, Strategic Studies Institute, page 2.; Hutchison, “Abu Sayyaf,” page 3.; Abuza, “Balik-Terrorism,” page 2.

<sup>8</sup> Abuza, “Balik-Terrorism,” page 2.

<sup>9</sup> “Abu Sayyaf Group.”

<sup>10</sup> CENTRA Technology, Inc. “Terrorist Group Profile: Abu Sayyaf Group,” Research Paper. 1 February 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Rommel Banlaoi, “THE ABU SAYYAF GROUP: From Mere Banditry to Genuine Terrorism,” Southeast Asian Affairs 2006, pp. 249-250.

<sup>12</sup> Banlaoi, “THE ABU SAYYAF GROUP,” page 7-8.

entering the Philippines, and (later) the 9/11 attacks and subsequent CT efforts.<sup>13</sup> Internal politics also stymied ASG's growth when MNLF agreed on a political settlement with the government in 1996. Ties with other jihadi groups continued to grow, however. In the late 1990s, JI used MILF on Mindanao for training and operational planning, bringing JI in direct contact with ASG and MILF combatants.<sup>14</sup>

During this phase, ASG had limited operation capabilities, but successfully carried out terrorist activities including ambushes, bombings, kidnappings and executions. They largely targeted Filipino Christians on Basilan and the west coast of Mindanao, and focused on recruitment from other splinter groups, including the MNLF.

ASG suffered a major setback when founder Abdurajak Janjalani was killed in 1998 by the Philippine military that has launched a CT raid on Basilan Island. Though command was transferred to Janjalani's brother Khadaffy Janjalani, and Ghalib Andang, this severed an important and direct link between ASG and AQ-core.

## Phase two: Infighting and increased criminality (1998–2002)

After Abdurajak Janjalani's death in 1998, ASG's activity declined and its remaining operations focused on criminality over ideology. Though the group still carried out terrorist acts, they were conducted for the express purpose of meeting the group's basic financial needs, as opposed to progressing a jihadist agenda. Overall the group focused on survival.

In the late 1990s, ASG splintered into two major factions, based in Basilan and Sulu.<sup>15</sup> In July 1999 the factions agreed to appoint Abdurajak's brother, Khadaffy, as emir but the group's objectives and ideology were uncertain during this time<sup>16</sup> as ASG began operating as a more traditionally criminal enterprise relying on raids, theft,

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<sup>13</sup> Zack Fellman, "Abu Sayyaf Group," AQAM Futures Project, Case Study Number 5, CSIS, November 2011, page 3.

<sup>14</sup> "Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations"; also Larry Nicksch, *Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation*, Congressional Research Service, 2007, accessed 6/7/2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL31265.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Banlaoi, "THE ABU SAYYAF GROUP," page 252.

<sup>16</sup> Banlaoi, "THE ABU SAYYAF GROUP," page 252.

and kidnap for ransom.<sup>17</sup> ASG also increased its kidnapping operations aimed at foreigners for the purpose of extracting ransom.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between AQ and ASG was slowly strengthened in 2000-2001 after 9/11 when Khaddafy Janjalani began to reorient ASG operations, priorities and ideology toward AQ operations. After 9/11, the Philippine government received increase CT support from the U.S. The Philippine government continued to negotiate with both remnant MNLF and MILF, while ASG continued to organize against the government.<sup>19</sup>

## Phase three: Reemergence as an ideologically-driven terrorist group (2002–2006)

Shortly after 2002, Khaddafy Janjalani consolidated his power as emir and asserted control over the varying ASG factions, clarifying the group's mission as a jihadi terrorist organization rather than a criminal organization.<sup>20</sup> Janjalani refocused the group's mission on large scale terrorist attacks against high visibility Western targets like those in Manila and Davao.<sup>21</sup> ASG carried out several successful and high profile attacks during this time. For example, Janjalani successfully executed the Philippine's most deadly terrorist attack on record sinking Superferry 14 in 2004 and killing hundreds, and coordinated a series of bombings across multiple cities on Valentine's Day 2005.

Janjalani also worked to establish relations with regional AQ-affiliates like JI and deepened ASG's existing ties with the MILF. Indication of the ASG/JI relationship was evident in 2003 when two senior JI leaders (Umar Patek and Dulmatin) took refuge with ASG in the Philippines and trained ASG fighters in bomb making.<sup>22,23</sup> ASG began to face increased pressure from the U.S. as a result of ASG's association the AQ-core

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<sup>17</sup> Zachary Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines," June 15, 2008, Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*; also Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines."

<sup>18</sup> Niksch, *Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation*.

<sup>19</sup> "Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations."

<sup>20</sup> Hutchison, "Abu Sayyaf," page 7.

<sup>21</sup> Hutchison, "Abu Sayyaf," page 8; also Fellman, "Abu Sayyaf Group," page 3-4.

<sup>22</sup> Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines."

<sup>23</sup> Fellman, "Abu Sayyaf Group," page 3-4.

and their tactic of kidnapping US citizens for ransom, and executing victims if demands were not met.<sup>24</sup>

## Phase four: Fracture & leaderless decline (2006–2014)

In 2006 the Philippine government (along with U.S. advisors) launched Operation Ultimatum, which took a heavy toll on ASG senior leadership. Khadaffy Janjalani was killed, creating a power vacuum and plunging the group into disarray.<sup>25</sup>

As in the period between 1998 and 2002 ASG reverted to existing as a survivalist criminal network, falling back on kidnap for ransom and small scale attacks against local police.<sup>26</sup> ASG continued to splinter along clan lines.<sup>27</sup> Any remaining relationship between ASG and AQ core and affiliates in the region was largely severed after Janjalani died. Since Janjalani's death, ASG has lacked an ideological leader that has been able to unify all of the group's varied factions.<sup>28</sup>

## Phase five: ASG divergence and divided loyalty (2014–Present)

In 2014, the emergence of ISIS deepened the rift between ASG factions. In the summer of 2014, the leader of ASG's Basilan-based faction, Isnilon Hapilon, pledged allegiance to ISIS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>29</sup> The Basilan-based faction has since executed violent attacks against civilian targets, while the Jolo faction has

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<sup>24</sup> Lisa Robinson, Patrick B. Johnston and Gillian S. Oak, "U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014," RAND, page 12.

<sup>25</sup> Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines."

<sup>26</sup> Fellman, "Abu Sayyaf Group," page 3-4; also Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines."

<sup>27</sup> "Abu Sayyaf Group."

<sup>28</sup> "Abu Sayyaf Group."

<sup>29</sup> Counter Extremism Project, "CEP Releases Report on Abu Sayyaf Group Following Attack in South Philippines," November 8, 2016, accessed 6/8/2017, <https://www.counterextremism.com/press/cep-releases-report-abu-sayyaf-group-following-attack-south-philippines>; also Maria A. Ressa, "Senior Abu Sayyaf leader swears oath to ISIS," Rappler, August 04, 2014, accessed 6/8/2017, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/65199-abu-sayyaf-leader-oath-isis>.

continued to operate more like a criminal enterprise than a terrorist group. ASG continues to fight internally about the group's relationship with ISIS and there has been no observable resolution to the disagreement. There is no longer any traceable relationship with AQ core.

The objectives of the group today are difficult to understand because ASG is compartmentalized and amorphous; internal disagreement about the group's relationship to ISIS complicates command and control and generates uncertainty in determining ASG's mission. However, the US Department of State considers Hapilon the present leader of ASG and treats his pledge to ISIS as representative of the group in its entirety.<sup>30</sup> In 2016, Hapilon attempted to rebrand ASG as Al-Harakatul al-Islamiyyah (Islamic Movement) to further clarify the group's commitment to building an Islamic caliphate in the region.<sup>31</sup>

Though ASG received material support from AQ in the past, in more recent years the group has financed itself through extortion, smuggling, narcotics production and trafficking, and kidnap-for-ransom operations.<sup>32</sup> Today ASG uses the threat of indiscriminate public violence as a means to extort, intimidate, and strike against the Philippine government after the fashion of ISIS. The bulk of ASG attacks in recent years have been kidnap-for-ransom of foreign tourists and attacks against the public or security forces in the Sulu archipelago and Mindanao. ASG has also released multiple video-recorded beheadings of westerners when their ransom demands are not met.<sup>33</sup> Presently ASG's reach is confined to the Philippines though a relationship with ISIS may change that limitation in the coming years.<sup>34</sup> Abu Sayyaf continues to work with other criminal groups around the archipelago.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism: ASG*. <https://staging-pa3.state.gov/releases/43652>.

<sup>31</sup> Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, *Pro-Isis Groups In Mindanao and their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia*, October 25, 2016, [http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2016/10/IPAC\\_Report\\_33.pdf](http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2016/10/IPAC_Report_33.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> CENTRA Technology, Inc. "Terrorist Group Profile: Abu Sayyaf Group," Research Paper. 1 February 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Felipe Villamor and Melissa Eddy, "Video Shows Beheading of German by Abu Sayyaf in Philippines," *The New York Times*, 2/27/17, accessed 6/12/2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/27/world/asia/jurgen-kantner-hostage-abu-sayyaf.html?\\_r=1&mtref=undefined](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/27/world/asia/jurgen-kantner-hostage-abu-sayyaf.html?_r=1&mtref=undefined).

<sup>34</sup> CENTRA Technology, Inc. "Terrorist Group Profile: Abu Sayyaf Group," Research Paper. 1 February 2007; In addition to ties with Daesh, ASG is affiliated with: the Philippine Misuari Renegade/Breakaway Group (MRG/MBG), a disgruntled offshoot of the MILF, the Philippine Raja Solaiman Movement (RSM), a militant group increasingly associated with terrorism which seeks broad conversion to Islam of Philippine citizens and the transition of Philippine government to

A marked increase in violence against civilians and Philippine soldiers in and around the city of Marawi<sup>36</sup> in 2016 and 2017 led President Rodrigo Duterte to place the southern island of Mindanao under military rule in May 2017.<sup>37</sup>

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traditional Islamic government”, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) , the Communist New People’s Army (NPA), and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

<sup>35</sup> Felipe Villamor, “Clash Between Philippine Forces and Abu Sayyaf Leaves 9 Dead,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2017, accessed 6/8/2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/11/world/asia/philippines-abu-sayyaf-isis.html?mcubz=2>.

<sup>36</sup> Floyd Whaley, “Abu Sayyaf Militants Thriving as Hostage-Takers in Philippines,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2016, accessed 6/8/2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/27/world/asia/abu-sayyaf-philippines-kidnappings.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Sofia Lotto Persio, “ISIS-Linked Abu Sayyaf Militants Storm Cathedral after Duterte Declares Martial Law,” *Newsweek*, 5/24/17, accessed 6/7/2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/duterte-faces-hostage-situation-marawi-city-isis-linked-abu-sayyaf-militants-614454>.

# Security Vulnerabilities in the Philippines

The independent assessment involved analyzing the security environment in which each affiliate or associate operated. We conducted the environmental analysis on the assumption that the success of an Al-Qaeda affiliate or associate is based not solely on resources, funding and leadership structure, but also on a permissive environment with security vulnerabilities. For ASG, we concluded that there were five relevant security vulnerabilities in the Philippines including internal conflict, history of violent jihadism, government illegitimacy, demographic instabilities, and security sector ineffectiveness.

Table 1 below describes vulnerabilities in the Philippines, where ASG operates.

Table 1. Security vulnerabilities in the Philippines

| Vulnerability     | Details                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Internal conflict | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The southern Philippines has a long history of conflict,<sup>38</sup> which has included Muslim insurgent groups, communist militants, clan militias and criminal gang networks.<sup>39</sup></li> <li>• Separatist movements who use terrorist tactics have included the MNLF, MILF and ASG. These groups have had direct links to other jihadi groups including JI, Al-Qaeda and ISIS.</li> <li>• Much of the conflict is centered in and around the islands of Mindanao, especially on Basilan and Jolo.<sup>40</sup></li> <li>• The communist insurgency is led by the Communist Party of the Philippines' (CPP) military wing known as the New People's Army (NPA). The insurgency is one of the oldest communist insurgencies</li> </ul> |

<sup>38</sup> Salvatore Schiavo-Campo and Mary Judd, "The Mindanao Conflict in the Philippines: Roots, Costs, and Potential Peace Dividend," *The World Bank: Social Development Papers: Conflict Prevention & Reconstruction*, no. No. 24 (2005), accessed 6/12/2017, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCPR/214578-1111996036679/20482477/WP24\\_Web.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCPR/214578-1111996036679/20482477/WP24_Web.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> BBC News, "Guide to the Philippines conflict," News: Asia, October 8, 2012, accessed 6/12/2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17038024>.

<sup>40</sup> BBC News, "Guide to the Philippines conflict," News: Asia.



|                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                        | in the world.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>History of violent jihadism</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a long history of Muslim-Christian tension in the southern end of the Philippine archipelago.</li> <li>• This tension manifested in Muslim separatist movements. Some of these separatist movements (MILF, ASG) declared a jihad against the Philippine government, while others (MNLF) worked within the system to reach a negotiated settlement.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Government Illegitimacy</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decades of insurgency in the Philippines has created an ongoing question of legitimacy for the government.</li> <li>• President Rodrigo Duterte's support of extra-judicial killings and imposition of martial law in some areas has simultaneously garnered him a high approval rating for those who view him as tough on drugs, crime and terrorism, and deeply concerned human rights activists and others who condemn the Philippine's culture of impunity.<sup>41</sup></li> </ul> |
| <b>Demographic Instabilities</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because the Philippines is an archipelago nation made up of over 7,000 islands, it contains a large amount of cultural and social diversity.</li> <li>• There is widespread poverty in much of the Philippines with vast disparities in income and quality of life across regions, though it has outpaced neighboring countries in economic growth.<sup>42</sup></li> </ul>                                                                                                             |
| <b>Security Sector Ineffectiveness</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Armed Forces of the Philippines has been unable to exert force over the entire archipelago. It has been called one of Asia's weakest militaries.<sup>43</sup></li> <li>• The security sector faces many challenges including insurgencies, natural disasters and territorial and sovereignty disputes.</li> <li>• Duterte is in the midst of implementing an armed forces modernization strategy.</li> </ul>                                                                        |

<sup>41</sup> Miguel Syjuco, "This Is Why Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte Will Get Away With Murder," Time, Aug 15, 2016, accessed 6/12/2017, <http://time.com/4453587/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-dictator-impunity-marcos/>.

See also: Phelim Kine, "Killing and Lies: Philippine President Duterte's 'War on Drugs' Exposed," Human Rights Watch, March 9, 2017, accessed 6/12/2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/09/killing-and-lies-philippine-president-dutertes-war-drugs-exposed>.

<sup>42</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "About the Philippines," UNDP, accessed 6/12/2017, <http://www.ph.undp.org/content/philippines/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, "What's Next for Philippine Military Modernization Under Duterte?," The Diplomat, March 17, 2017, accessed 6/12/2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/whats-next-for-philippine-military-modernization-under-duterte/>.

## U.S. Approach to Counter ASG

The USG approach to countering ASG was unique given the length of time and persistence of its support of the Philippine armed forces over the course of 14 years (2000-2014). U.S. special operations forces (SOF) designed and executed U.S. CT efforts in the southern Philippines.<sup>44</sup> The CT effort in the Philippines was carried out primarily by the Philippine government, with U.S. forces in a supportive role. U.S. forces and government did not act unilaterally. The CT campaign contained three lines of effort (LOEs): (1) Training, advising, and assisting Philippine security forces (PSF), including the provision of direct support and intelligence (2) Conducting civil-military operations (CMO) (3) Conducting information operations (IO).<sup>45</sup>

## U.S. government approaches

Table 2 below describes these and other efforts by the U.S. to counter ASG in the Philippines.

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<sup>44</sup> Robinson, "The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy."

<sup>45</sup> Swain, *Case Study: Operation Enduring Freedom Philippines*.

Table 2. U.S. approaches to ASG

| U.S. Approach                        | Details                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Advise, Assist, and Accompany</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior to 9/11, the Philippine government invited U.S. forces to aid in addressing the growing terror and insurgent threat in the southern islands, which had included the kidnapping of U.S. citizens. DoS/DoD supported the standup of the Light Reaction Company (LRC). Additional support in the planning stages when 9/11 occurred.</li> <li>• After the 9/11 attacks, ASG's connection to JI and AQ-core provided the U.S. authorization and funding for a sustained 14-year U.S. operation to counter-ASG known as Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines.<sup>46</sup></li> <li>• In November 2001, the U.S. and the Philippines agreed to collaborate in the War on Terror (WOT) to bolster the Philippine security forces' ability to counter transnational terrorism. President Bush promised \$100 million in military assistance and \$4.6 billion in economic aid. Then-president Arroyo agreed to allow the U.S. military to deploy to the Philippines to advise and assist the Philippines Armed Forces.<sup>47</sup> During this time, the Philippines and Southeast Asia were declared the "Second Front in the War on Terror" by the U.S., who also formally declared ASG to be an Al-Qaeda affiliate in the region.<sup>48</sup></li> </ul> |

<sup>46</sup> Robinson, "The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy."

<sup>47</sup> Robinson, "The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy."

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Measures, "What is Abu Sayyaf?" *Centre on Religion and Geopolitics*. May 17, 2016. Accessed July 26, 2017. <http://www.religionandgeopolitics.org/philippines/what-abu-sayyaf>.

- OEF-P epitomized a partnered, light footprint approach to CT.<sup>49</sup>
  - After an initial phase in which 1,300 U.S. forces arrived in the region, U.S. forces averaged 500-600 at any one time thereafter.<sup>50</sup>
  - U.S. military operations occur in the Philippines under a whole-of-government effort coordinated by the embassy.<sup>51</sup>
- U.S. special operations forces (SOF) designed and executed U.S. CT efforts carried out in the southern Philippines.<sup>52</sup>
- The CT effort in the Philippines was carried out primarily by the Philippine government, with U.S. forces in a supportive role. U.S. forces and government did not act unilaterally.
  - The OEF-P campaign contained three LOEs: (1) Training, advising, and assisting Philippine security forces (PSF), including the provision of direct support and intelligence (2) Conducting civil-military operations (CMO) (3) Conducting information operations (IO)<sup>53</sup>
- In fall 2001, U.S. SOF forces conducted an assessment in the Philippines that established an evaluation of terrain and threats. Joint Task force 510 (JTF-51) deployed in February 2002 to conduct Operation Balikatan. This operation included to CMO, IO, training, advice and assistance.
- At operational level, US SOF advised and assisted AFP to improve joint processes and integrate command and control, planning and coordination, developing plans and conducting intelligence analysis.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy.”

<sup>50</sup> Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy.”

<sup>51</sup> Richard Swain. *Case Study: Operation Enduring Freedom Philippines*. U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Center. October 2010. Accessed July 26, 2017. <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a532988.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy.”

<sup>53</sup> Swain, *Case Study: Operation Enduring Freedom Philippines*.

<sup>54</sup> Linda Robinson, Patrick B. Johnston, and Gillian S. Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, RAND Corporation, 2016, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1200/RR1236/RAND\\_RR1236.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1236/RAND_RR1236.pdf).

### Train & Equip Partners for CT

- Examples of U.S.-assisted operations include:
  - **Operation Liberty** – US forces provided advisory, communications, medical and ISR support, exfiltrated surrendering fighters, determined shortfalls in AFP-conducted operation. Experience used served as basis of subsequent training.
  - **The Burnham Rescue** – U.S. SOF trained but could not assist units that attempted a rescue of U.S. hostages on Basilan. One hostage was rescued (injured), two others killed.
  - **Targeting Abu Sabaya** – AFP pursuit of Abu Sabaya entailed intelligence and combat operations by land and maritime forces, supported by JTF 510 advice, imagery intelligence (IMINT), ISR assets and other assets.
  - **Operation Ultimatum** – began August 1 2006- ended Oct 2017. A series of operations that aimed to take down the ASG network on Jolo. During this time AFP demonstrated new competence in planning and conducting large-scale operations and embraced CMO as a major element of campaign.
  - **The Abu Solaiman Operation** – successful killing of ASG leader due to effective fusion of intelligence and operations<sup>55</sup>
- Helped train, equip and improve Philippine force.<sup>56</sup> US SOF provided training, advice and assistance to conventional AFP units. Later, US SOF provided training, advice and assistance to the Philippine National Police (PNP) Special Action Forces (SAF), the Light Reaction Regiment (LRR) and other SOF.<sup>57</sup>
- Training was provided to and for:
  - Ground combat
  - Air crews
  - Naval sources
  - Police special action forces
  - Philippines special operations units

<sup>55</sup> Linda Robinson, Patrick B. Johnston, and Gillian S. Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001–2014*, RAND Corporation, 2016, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1200/RR1236/RAND\\_RR1236.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1236/RAND_RR1236.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines*.

<sup>57</sup> *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines*.

|                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Light infantry skills and self-assessment</li> <li>• US obligated \$10.5m (2001), \$56m (2002) in military assistance. Military assistance never obligated less than \$34m after this.<sup>58</sup></li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Security Sector Reform</b>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The U.S. conducted activities in support of institutional development of the PSF including training and reform to operational planning and advice, CMO, IO, Intelligence support operations, ISR</li> <li>• At the institutional level, the U.S. provided development of Philippine SOF – created training cadre, schoolhouse, selection criteria, course, doctrine and non-commissioned officer (NCO) academy. Later helped with creation of CMO capability.<sup>59</sup></li> </ul> |
| <b>Civilian Military Operations (CMO)</b>                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CMO was a key component of OEF-P and was conducted alongside IO to enable combat operations</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Messaging/ counter-messaging (countering violent extremism)</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• U.S. IO was conducted in conjunction with Philippine forces to increase populations support for Philippine government and reduce safe-havens for ASG.<sup>60</sup></li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Intelligence and Information Sharing</b>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intelligence gathering and sharing was a principle activity in the U.S.-Philippine relationship</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Established U.S. posture in theater to</b>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was an extended U.S. presence in the Philippines during this time in support of CT training and operations.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

<sup>58</sup> *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines.*

<sup>59</sup> *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines.*

<sup>60</sup> *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines.*

support  
persistent CT  
operations

**Support Host  
Nation Ability  
to Own the  
Battlespace**

- In October 2003, the U.S. designated the Philippines a Major Non-NATO Ally.
- The U.S. intervention was designed and conducted to increase the legitimacy of the Philippine government by supporting their armed forces ability to counter the terror threat and interact positively with civilians through civil affairs and CMO.<sup>61</sup>
- All operations were conducted “by, with and through” host nation forces

<sup>61</sup> Swain, *Case Study: Operation Enduring Freedom Philippines*.

## Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt ASG?

The U.S. played a supportive role in helping the Philippine armed forces **disrupt and dismantle** ASG from 2000-2014.<sup>62</sup> By 2014, the Philippine armed forces successfully diminished the risk posed by ASG by targeting key leaders, weakening ASG's network, reducing their ability to recruit from the local population, and honing their own effectiveness in operations by receiving training, funds, advice and assistance from U.S. SOF.<sup>63</sup> Success can be contributed to the manner by which U.S. support was provided (by, with and through), and the sustained time-span in which the support was provided (over 14 years).

From 2001-2014, U.S. SOF activities in the Philippines correlates with changes in threat level, threat conditions, a population that overwhelmingly and increasingly rejected the terrorist group and supported the government. U.S. SOF activities in the Philippines also correlate to increased Philippine capability to successfully carry out operations.

These actions led to:

- Reduction in enemy-initiated attacks
  - Attacks declined 56% between 2000-2012
- Decreased numbers of ASG militants
  - ASG-armed militants declined from 1270 to 437 (other estimates 2200 to 400)
- Polls showing reduced support for ASG and increased satisfaction with PSF<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> This analysis should be viewed through the lens that the relationship between ASG and AQ was not determined to be sufficiently intertwined to merit the title of "affiliate." As such, successful counter-AQ and counter-ASG operations may not be linked in the same way as other examples in this report.

<sup>63</sup> Niksch, *Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation*.

<sup>64</sup> Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*.



It is inconclusive as to whether these results are lasting as ASG has regained strength and influence in the southern Philippines in the years after the majority of U.S. SOF departed. ASG continues to carry out attacks on Philippine armed forces, civilians and foreigners. ASG's resurgence is also linked to an ASG-faction's affiliation to ISIS.

**Though ASG was never defeated**, there is limited evidence that ASG is still aligned in any meaningful way with AQ-core or affiliates. ASG as a group, however, has grown in strength after it factionalized into ISIS-aligned and non-ISIS aligned splinter groups.

A positive by-product of U.S. counter ASG activities was the increased bilateral relations and mil-to-mil engagement between the U.S. and Philippine for a sustained period of time. The relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines shifted with the election of President Rodrigo Duterte, who has voiced distrust of the U.S. presence in the Philippines. Though Duterte since ordered U.S. forces to leave the southern Philippines, this order has not been carried out. U.S. forces continue to operate in Mindanao and Duterte's directives have not been reflected in any action or requests by the Philippines military.<sup>65</sup> Philippine and U.S. forces continue to train together as of May 2017.<sup>66</sup>

Gaps remain in the Philippine armed forces capability and capacity despite years of training and assistance, and U.S. SOF did not have the remit or capacity to address underlying drivers of conflict such as crime and poverty<sup>67</sup> Challenges during the time of U.S. SOF engagement included the 'balloon effect' where high value individuals and associated networks would move from one island to another.

## Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of ASG?

The vulnerabilities that exist in the Philippines pre-dated ASG.

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<sup>65</sup> Tara Copp, "PACOM chief sees no changes in US-Philippines military relationship," Stars and Stripes, November 15, 2016, accessed June 8, 2017, <https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/pacom-chief-sees-no-changes-in-us-philippines-military-relationship-1.439469#.WTbybevyu00>.

<sup>66</sup> Staff Sgt. Christopher McCullough, "Philippine, US Troops Train Together to Provide Relief from the Sea to Remote Areas," U.S. Pacific Command, May 18, 2017, accessed June 7, 2017, <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1186580/philippine-us-troops-train-together-to-provide-relief-from-the-sea-to-remote-ar/>.

<sup>67</sup>Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*.

## What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

The overall U.S. approach in the Philippines was consistently 'by, with and through' where respecting Philippine authority to lead led to a prolonged commitment of sustained advisory role for U.S. The U.S. did not conduct any unilateral engagements.

U.S. SOF supported Philippine armed forces in undertaking a population-centric approach to CT including targeted CMO, information gathering and IO. Over time U.S. SOF focused its training and assistance on institution building (as opposed to tactical and operational training) in order to ensure embedded and lasting institutional learning. U.S. SOF placed an emphasis on assessments and subsequent adaptations to plans.

## Conclusion

In this case study, we examined ASG's leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. We also examined how the group has evolved over time. We outlined the vulnerabilities in the Philippine's security environment that ASG has exploited, and the relative effectiveness of the U.S. government's approaches to counter ASG over time. For the full context in which this case study was used, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> McQuaid, et. al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

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